

WOMEN & FILM

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Part 1

"Our frustrations at being confined to our bodies should be realized and once known overcome by the use of tools, not to lash out in destruction, but to reach others who are equally frustrated."

Dean Everson,
Radical Software, #5

The Women's Video Festival was held from September 14-30 at the Kitchen, a multi-media theatre in the Mercer Arts Center theatre complex, Greenwich Village, New York City, with support from the New York State Council on the Arts. The Kitchen space is open to artists working in all aspects of the electronic media. The Festival was organized by Susan Milano, Shridhar Bapat, Laura Kassos, Liz Sweetman and Vandra Thorburn at the suggestion of Steina and Woody Vasulka, organizers of the Kitchen.

"We started work on it (W.V.F.) in July on short notice, and with very little money for advertising . . . We had listings on the back page of the *Voice*, which are free, and we tried to reach radio stations with public service announcements. We asked for contributions, we suggested a dollar, we didn't turn anyone away, we let in anyone who couldn't pay, and we made back all our expenses, plus some beyond that.

"We sent out about 65 letters to video women on the east coast. The names came from a listing in *Dumping Place* (*Dumping Place* came out of a video conference at Livingston College in April '72, and was an attempt at centralizing video information). From the 65 letters



REPORT FROM NEW YORK

Women's Video Festival At The Kitchen (SEPT. 14-30, 1972)

Jeanne Betancourt

we received 25 tapes. We played everything we received, unless it was so technically bad that it wouldn't play on our equipment.

"Most people working in half-inch video are either teachers or servicing equipment. There are no glamour jobs in half-inch. Half-inch video makers are working in a vacuum, as there are few places to show



their work. One-half inch cannot be shown on commercial television; the few outlets are Cable TV, a school or private situation or a video theatre. The Kitchen is about the only place with an open house policy — accepting and showing anybody's tapes. In the sense that the Festival allowed video makers to see audience reaction it was extremely helpful.

"Video as used in commercial television is very closed to women. Cable video is a lot more avant garde, it's not packaged the way TV is packaged. You don't have to produce programming that will please everybody in America. You can program and cable cast to a ten block area and in that way respond to neighborhood needs.

"In terms of video artists there are a couple of different schools of thought. There are people working in video as a pure medium, creating abstract forms using video feedback; others are making documentary style street television. There are people using video as a process, feeding back impressions of themselves and their lives onto video; the focus on process rather than product is obviously more exploratory than television.

"A lot of groups are making tapes as an ongoing process in consciousness-raising. I know a group trying to make a tape of how women are treated on the street. This is very difficult to do; it is almost impossible to tape men's street behavior when they are aware of being taped. I once saw something on commercial TV news — a women's group standing around a construction site making remarks to construction workers. Of course all they showed were women saying, "Gee, you're handsome, I'd like

to meet you!" This is not the essence at all; what your average woman gets on the street is really disgusting gutter mouth crap. Since it was commercial TV, they couldn't air somebody saying things a lot more appropriate. Using one-half inch, you can show anything; there isn't any censorship.

"Before video, I was working for an advertising agency. I knew one of the partners at Global Village. I was interested in learning about video. I started working there without pay and auditing a New School course. The first tape that I worked on from start to finish was *Transsexuals*, a workshop tape at the New School. It was the first time that I could take an idea of my own and develop it in a media that other people could see. Now I'm working for a program at Queens College which takes people from various agencies like drug agencies and agencies for counseling adolescents . . . The National Institute of Mental Health sponsors workshops for professionals and paraprofessionals to come in and learn new techniques in dealing with people. We use video for role playing, and also for supplementary teaching aids . . .

" . . . I find things all around me that I think would be good on video, and would be interesting to other people. You don't need manufactured images anymore. Truth is stranger than fiction. You don't need Hollywood images anymore."

[excerpted from an interview with Susan Milano]

Part 2

My first experiences in music, printing, sculpture, poetry and film were under

the auspices of men. For the first time, I have been introduced to an art medium through the efforts of women. I was unable to attend the Festival itself; and when I called Susan Milano, one of the directors of the Festival, she agreed to an interview and a special viewing of the tapes which she still held.

Milano's own tape, *Tattooed Lady* was quite impressive in the sensitivity with which she reveals to us the warmth and humanity of the once bearded, now tattooed lady, Jean Carroll. Milano sees the grotesque as an expression both of dignified beauty and originality growing out of the misery of humanity in a society which offers few possibilities for creativity. The tape includes: Jean Carroll explaining her career; Peter Plulas, while he demonstrates tattooing; a Manhattan plastic surgeon, Howard Bellin, explaining the process whereby tattoos color the skin and how they can be removed; and reactions of passersby to tattooing which run the gamut from people who consider tattoos as body jewelry to those who consider them perverse.

Norma Pontes' and Rita Moreira's *Lesbian Mothers* (also shown through cable TV, New York, summer '72) includes a beautiful and explicit love scene between two lesbians. Given the male homosexuality of the New American Cinema, women's love deserves some dignified exposure. The video also deals with the problems of lesbians having to fight with ex-husbands and prejudiced judges for the custody of their children. It contrasts lives of lesbian mothers at home with their children to responses passersby make to an interviewer asking "What do you think of lesbian mothers?" most of whom responded with disgust.

In *The Worst Is Over*, Darcy Ynstadter documents her own abortion — from the doctor's office through the rest period and recovery. The small space of the doctor's office is crowded with film and video camerawomen recording one another's recording of this event as Darcy herself shouts camera directions while at the same time undergoing a suction-method abortion. The abortion is undramtic, clean, and quick, unlike the blow-ups of fetuses that the "Right-to-Lifers" use in their propaganda. After the abortion, she lies down, rather faint, to rest when it is over. Soon she dresses and leaves with her friends and her equipment. We are left with an awareness of the havoc that an unwanted child would have created in this woman's life; an awareness of the making of this video serving in its matter-of-factness to instruct us of one of the ways a woman can come to terms with the meaning of self-determination.

There were a number of less overtly political and more aesthetically inventive works shown. Joanne Kyger's and Roger Xangone's *Descartes* blended electronic effects with a tape of Joanne reading her poetry. Video poems were also performed by Keiko Tsumo and Yoko Maruyama. Judith Scott and Elsa Tambellini in *Cycles* create a video "event" during which dancers react to moods created by various tapes played simultaneously over several monitors.

The importance of the efforts of these women cannot be exaggerated. It is critical for us, as women, to have voice in the media in order to end the abusive mythologizing of us which prevails.

"Just as long as newspapers and magazines are controlled by men, every

woman upon them must write articles which are reflections of men's ideas. As long as that continues, women's ideas and deepest convictions will never get before the public." —Susan B. Anthony (Chicago Tribune, 1893)

[Festival tapes are available from the Kitchen; *Lesbian Mothers* from: Norma Pontes and Rita Moreira, c/o Mercandante, 11 W. 42nd Street, Room 1744, New York City]



Susan Milano

